

Our greatest national security threat isn't covered by the military spending bill

It's climate change.

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In December, President Biden signed a \$770 billion military spending bill, \$24 billion more than he had requested. The bill sailed through Congress with bipartisan support in a way that almost nothing else does. The spending bill pays for everything the military does—from small pay raises to maintaining military bases on multiple continents. What it does not represent is any kind of departure from the usual congressional rubber stamp for military spending. It should.

This bill comes on the heels of our withdrawal from Afghanistan, in which we proved that no amount of military might, superior prowess, and spending can win an unwinnable war. The shortcomings, mistakes, and outright failings that constituted the \$6.4 trillion war were well documented by the military itself in detailed reports.

These reports have been summarily ignored in this spending bill, which acts as though nothing is amiss for the US military. But this should be a moment of critical

reckoning.

Key to this reckoning is what we typically call national security, the means by which we take steps to ensure the safety and well-being of the people of this country. There is almost nothing in the \$770 billion spending bill that addresses the greatest threat to this safety and well-being: climate change and its related disasters. According to the *Washington Post*, more than 40 percent of Americans live in counties hit by climate-related disasters in 2021. Imagine an invading army that occupied 40 percent of the country. That is the scale of the national security crisis in which we find ourselves.

Congress isn't addressing this crisis, but it is funding the US military at historically high rates. A typical target for those opposing military spending of this magnitude is the F-35 fighter jet. This program alone is expected to cost taxpayers more than \$1 trillion over its lifetime, yet it is riddled with problems ranging from ballooning costs to technical flaws.

Let's imagine what else we might do with that money. One possibility: for the price of one F-35A fighter plane, we could install direct solar power systems in 4,000 homes. For the cost of the whole fleet, we could move our entire grid to renewable energy sources and perhaps forestall some of the disasters now awaiting us.

Instead the Congressional Budget Office projects that Congress will spend about \$8.5 trillion on the military over the next decade. That's half a trillion more than it will spend on all nonmilitary discretionary programs combined. It's also more than China, India, Russia, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Australia will spend on their militaries combined.

In the past, arguments like this one have failed to produce the needed moment of reckoning. We are still convinced that our real enemies are far away and can be addressed with military might. But maybe as we watch our friends and neighbors and perhaps our own homes and livelihoods fall victim to floods, tornados, hurricanes, and wildfires, we will be ready to rethink the meaning and purpose of national security spending in real time.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "A matter of security."